

ON-LINE COMMUNICATION BY SOCIALIZATION SITES

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Socialization online sites have become important landmarks for people all around the world and of all ages, especially for youth. Users of such services can socialize with people they know or with unknown, people located in the vicinity or at different distances, even on different continents.

In other words, social online sites help people to interact with others of their kind, to know people who have the same passions as they have. The access to such sites is free and the members can build profiles (which include data on name, age, hobbies or favorite books and movies) and can share photos, music or videos with the others. A friend is, in the language of the socialization sites, any user who has a link to his/her profile page. Users can send messages or can leave comments on other profiles. In some cases, people who meet on such sites decide to meet also in the real life.

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1. Developing online marketing through Web 2.0

During the current period of time there are organizing software and procedures that control the interpersonal exchange of information in socialization networking sites, text messaging, instant messaging, blogs, role-play online games and online education. All these applications can be grouped under the term "social media", a concept that describes the social interaction software based on Web 2.0 - seen more as a software platform, where the user controls / create his own data, information, usually offering them to others through collaborative tools.

Web 2.0 is nothing but the web today, which changes daily grows and includes services and people. The most important features are: achieving common networks (MySpace, Facebook and others), the presence of many small businesses, online search for partners, making new friends⁸¹³. Blogs, wikis, podcasts, and text comments are the most important forms through which the web content has evolved a lot. Basically, it has become accessible for anyone to reveal his thoughts on the Internet. Blogs have also spread to the companies and today there appeared not only the personal and business agendas but also the political blogs. On the list of news, the blog is one of them, other services addressed to the community occurring also: the sharing of images (Flickr), joint news pages (Digg), social networking market (iWiW, myVIP) and the list is constantly expanding. Moreover, there are discussions about the next generation of web - 3.0, already. It involves the transforming of the Web into a huge database, the artificial intelligence development and the creating of a new-human web, the creating of semantic networking computers connected to the Internet which can combine information based on logical connections⁸¹⁴.

⁸¹³ <http://aseweb20.wetpaint.com>

⁸¹⁴ <http://www.blogcity.ro>

Turning to the current stage, we can say that the single direction and traditional media was changed step by step as the result of some activities: in addition to horizontal, general search engines, there also appeared vertical search engines (engines specialized in certain areas search information), and Google has brought the both together (Universal Search).

A description of Web 2.0 might be the following⁸¹⁵:

- includes a very wide range of applications and services using the web as a unitary organized platform for communication;
- is built on an architecture that encourages the active participation of users;
- allows easy interaction between users who have similar interests;
- enables users to generate content, share it with others, meaning a greater interactivity;
- facilitates the public access to databases;
- has the ability to connect various applications or services and to aggregate data from various sources - RSS, blogs;
- “talks” about: the socialization of information - a concept about applications and people, the emergence of collaborative tools like wikis, social networking platforms like MySpace, Hi5, LinkedIn and Second Life, blogs, data structures and communication documents, collections of bookmarks (like del.icio.us or digg), videos (YouTube) or images (flickr) etc.;
- syndication - RSS and tags structures: tree-classification removal and the application of labels, so that something is not strictly a descendant of another, but may belong to several categories;
- the improving of the users’ experience;
- democratization of content and distribution (user-created content and freely distributed);
- uses the power of Internet communities.

Video and Web 2.0 technologies help to improve collaboration between people and companies in the current context of increasing interactivity and globalization of labor. Most of the companies plan to prepare networks for implementation of video applications and innovative online collaboration. With the adoption of more wide-scale video and Web 2.0 technologies, companies are becoming increasingly interested in using video communications for the expansion of commercial activities, attracting more customers, improving collaboration between employees and implementation of environmental media.

Technologies such as blogs, wikis, telepresence and web conferencing, help companies to keep pace with the very dynamic changes in the field of IT applications and services. The main issue for investment in commercial video and Web 2.0 tools is to address growing customer demand for innovative products and services. Another factor considered for installing the video is, as pointed out above, the concern for the environmental issues.

In the current era of dynamic employees, informed and collaborative interaction characterized by increasing global importance, the horizontalizing of the organizational structures and interactivity, companies must use communication tools in an innovative way for increasing the degree of adaptability to dynamic change market.

Equally interesting is the fact that the U.S. companies which wish to use, in the next few years, videoconferencing technology are, in the same time, according to assessments of profitability during a fiscal year - companies with the greatest potential for development fast. Moreover, it is estimated that in the coming years, the fast-growing companies in Europe and in countries with emerging economies will implement Web 2.0 technology-based tools.

2. Concept and evolution of the socialization sites

Socialization networking sites are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a limited system, to devise a list of other users who are connected to their friends list and see what others in the system do. Nature and typology of these connections may vary from one site to another, but what makes the socialization sites unique is not that they allow individuals to know strangers, but that they allow users to compile and make public their network socialization (friends). The results may

⁸¹⁵ idem

be the links between individuals which, in other circumstances, would not occur. Also, on many socialization sites, the participants are not looking, in particular, to become acquainted with others, but to connect with people they already know.

After recording on a socialization networking site, users are asked to identify those they are related to in the system. Labeling depends on the site: “friends”, “contacts”, “fans”, most socialization networking sites requiring bidirectional confirmation of friendship. Public display of friendship is a crucial component of these types of sites. Friends’ lists contain links to each profile, allowing users to navigate the network structure by clicking the lists of friends. Most sites offer users a social mechanism by which they can leave messages on friends’ profiles also. Moreover, these sites usually have a feature of “Private Messaging” similar to the webmail.

Experts believe that the history of these sites began with the advent SixDegrees.com. It was auto characterized as a means of knowledge and communication, but despite the success enjoyed (million users), it was closed in 2000. As its creators say, the time for such services hasn’t come yet⁸¹⁶.

The next milestone was in 2002, Friendster - a site that initially proposed itself to help users to know, in the event of love affairs, their friends’ friends, who would be some more suitable pairs than the strangers. Friendster enjoyed a very big successful, quickly attracting hundreds of thousands of users, but technical problems, and the ease with which administrators were wiping fake accounts (for example, parodies of celebrities) led to a mass withdrawal of users. Friendster however remains very popular in countries like Philippines and Indonesia. Instead, former Friendster users have shifted to other similar services; MySpace is among the main beneficiaries.

On Hi5 (founded in 2002), users can create an online profile, which can show information such as interests, age and hometown and upload user pictures where other users can post (submit) comments. Hi5 also allows you to create personal photo albums and set up a music player in the profile.

In 2004, “The Facebook” was founded, originally as an academic network with the name “thefacebook.com” being later extended to companies like Apple and Microsoft⁸¹⁷. In May 2007, Facebook launched a platform to interact with other websites. Likewise, there were released many applications by means of which users can send different messages. In a few months, after the launch of Facebook, there had been initiated an application against spam also.

The growing user-generated content sites focused on media sharing and have started to implement features of “social networking” becoming, in turn, socialization sites. There are Flickr (for photos), Last.FM (music listening), YouTube (video sharing) as examples⁸¹⁸.

The idea of development of communication systems based on socialization sites is, also, operated by the U.S. emergency management (FEMA) which wants to use the Twitter microblog network sites or the Facebook socialization networking site in order to communicate in case of emergency (when the conventional communication networks will be broken), so that people can send information to the authorities, and may correspond better with those in areas at risk or already affected by various disasters or catastrophes⁸¹⁹.

3. Extending socialization sites worldwide and in Romania

According to www.wall-street.ro the worldwide number of users of socialization networking sites has grown explosively in 2009, and their influence has been confirmed at every big event, benefiting from continuous Internet access through smart phones⁸²⁰. For example, Facebook announced in early April 2010, that he crossed the threshold of 400 million users, after six years of existence (a year ago with

⁸¹⁶ Ana Soviany, www.revista22.ro, November 2008

⁸¹⁷ <http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki>

⁸¹⁸ <http://aseweb20.wetpaint.com>

⁸¹⁹ <http://neomania.ro>, November 2009

⁸²⁰ Cristina Negraru, www.wall-street.ro, December 2009

record 200 million visitors), and Twitter has a number of users increased from 5.57 million in September 2008 to over 58 million people in early 2010⁸²¹.

Moreover, Google recently competes with the social networks by adding to its email service, Gmail, functions that allow the users to change the status of their friends and share content online. These sites status updates may include content provided by the users' contacts on other Google sites, such as YouTube and Picasa. Currently, email service users can post short messages similar to those on Facebook or Twitter attached through Gmail's chat. Along with the status update feature sites, Gmail has a number of elements which together could provide an alternative to Facebook⁸²².

In terms of age of users, according to a report by research company Pew Research Center released in autumn 2009⁸²³, approximately three quarters (73%) of adolescents (12-17 years) and an almost equal number (72%) of young adults (18-29 years) use socialization networking sites like Facebook or MySpace. Among socialization networking sites, the study shows that Facebook is the leading destination for adults older than 18 years (73%). MySpace is on the second position with 48%, followed by LinkedIn, with 14%. The results also show that young people aged between 18 and 29 years use connectivity and mobile terminals, 66% of whom being users of laptops.

In our country, according to a November 2009 study by market research company Mercury Research, of the 44% of Internet users in urban areas, which states that are members of social networks, more than one third (36%) use Hi5. This is followed by Facebook with 16% and remotely Flixter (6%), LinkedIn (2%) and Twitter (2%)⁸²⁴.

Young Internet users, aged between 18 and 24, are most active, both as membership in social networks and the frequency of access to personal accounts. Only 20% of young people between 18 and 24 have at least one account in socializing networks, the opposite being represented by the people over 45 years, 80% of them not belonging to any communities.

Unlike members of other social networks, Hi5 members are more open to new friends or groups, the average number of "friends" network being over 140, while 17% belong to a group of this network.

As frequency of access, over half of Hi5 and Facebook members access their personal account at least once a week, the young people being the most active numbers. For example, 70% of hi5 members aged between 18 and 24 connects at least once a week, unlike the third of those between 25 and 34 that connect with the same frequency. A similar situation is encountered on Facebook as well, where 74% of young people between 18 and 24 access their account at least once a week, unlike 45% people aged between 25 and 34 years.

4. European initiatives for the privacy on socialization networking sites

Sites for socialization networking are an emerging social and economic phenomenon, attracting 41.7 million users in Europe and changing the way we interact with others on the web. The using of socialization networks increased last year by 35% in Europe and is expected to increase by over 100% to 107.4 million users by 2012⁸²⁵.

According to an EU study, 50% of young Europeans internet broadcast personal information may remain permanently online and be viewed by anyone⁸²⁶. For the socialization networks to continue to grow young users must feel safe when expanding their networks or sharing any personal information but sometimes, they risk to be blackmailed and harassed. In most cases, the cause is the lack of information on the availability of personal data: users do not know who can see data on personal profiles published or how they may limit access.

⁸²¹ idem

⁸²² www.zf.ro, February 2010

⁸²³ George Varban, www.wall-street.ro, February 2010

⁸²⁴ The Center for Innovation in Education, *Hi5: The Most Popular Socialization Network in Romania*, 2009, Bucharest: TEHNE – The Center for Development and Innovation in Education, www.elearning.ro

⁸²⁵ European Consumers Center Romania, <http://www.eccromania.ro/noutati>

⁸²⁶ www.euractiv.ro/uniunea-europeana/articles, February 2010

For this reason, the European Commission imposed the 23 companies that joined in 2009 to document “Principles for safer social networking” measures to ensure the protection of children using socialization sites in the network⁸²⁷. Their objective is to improve child safety and combat online harassment; so that most of the companies have given them the chance to protect themselves against risks by facilitating online transactions for changing privacy settings, blocking access to certain users or to delete comments and undesirable content.

The companies involved intend to limit these risks by⁸²⁸:

- providing a button to “report abuse” usable and accessible, enabling users to report any inappropriate contact or behavior of another user by the push of a button;
- ensuring that all profiles and online contact lists of the website users who are registered as minors are automatically set to “private.” This will make it more difficult to contact the young person with bad intentions;
- ensuring that profiles of the users under 18 years can not be searched (on the Web sites or search engines);
- ensuring that the privacy options are clear and accessible at all times, so that users can easily realize whether everyone or only their friends can see what they post online;
- preventing minors from using their services. If a socialization networking site is addressed to the teenagers over 13 years, it would be difficult for anyone under that age to register on that site.

Earlier this year, the Commission published a report on the implementation of the “Principles for social networks more secure”⁸²⁹. The report concludes that, of the 23 sites, 19 offer safety advice and information specifically directed to children and/or adolescents. The report also shows that most companies give the children the opportunity to protect themselves against possible risks of being online and to use a safe approach to confidentiality.

However, the European Commission believes that there are more to be done in order to protect online privacy. Less than half of companies that manage social networking (40%) prepared profiles of users under 18 to be visible, by default, only to their friends and only one third of them have unmet requests for help from users.

Changes towards improving the use of socialization networking sites are taking place because of the initiative of independent organizations such as the Electronic Privacy Information Center, Electronic Frontier Foundation and American Civil Liberties Union as well⁸³⁰.

Also, companies like Facebook (one of the largest socialization networking sites) have implemented changes based on user settings, which cause the publication of more of their personal information. The effect was the one of making complaints by those organizations that have expressed their concern about the possibility of people to express their personal data or pictures without intending to do so. Although Facebook said it had changed the settings to help users be more precise about how and where their information is published, after complaints, the site’s officials said they would simplify the process of restriction of information for the friends list outwardly.

Conclusions:

Social networking sites which are addressed primarily at young audiences are well positioned in the Internet industry through the use of technologies that help companies keep pace with change very dynamic field of software and IT services. But, as many would benefit these means of communication, we can not overlook the risks, of which the largest is even endangering someone’s life.

⁸²⁷ European Parliament, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/public>, February 2010

⁸²⁸ European Consumers Center Romania, <http://www.eccromania.ro/noutati>

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